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The Recyclists: Bikes, Borders and Basura

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The Recyclists: Bikes, Borders and Basura

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Report

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Abstract

The Recyclists: Bikes, Borders and Basura

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In January, 2009, I joined Bikes Across Borders, a local grassroots organization, on their yearly bike caravan to Mexico. The group works to promote bicycles, both here and in Mexico, as an environmentally and financially sound alternative to motorized transportation. Each winter, members ride bicycles they build out of salvaged parts to border cities in Mexico. They give these bicycles to maquiladora workers who would otherwise spend a large portion of their income on transportation. These workers make a fraction of what they would in the U.S. and live in shacks amid the pollution from the factories they work in. This is the story of one group's attempt at making a difference in the lives of these workers.

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October 29, 2008 – Austin, Texas

Walking into the Rhizome Collective, a large converted warehouse in East Austin, I saw a tall, thin man in his twenties. He had long, neat dreadlocks tied back, and thin, gold-rimmed glasses. He was leading three small girls in a bicycle slalom, weaving through a series of chairs on the warehouse floor.

"Is Bikes Across Borders happening tonight?" I asked him.

"This is it – we are biking across borders!" he replied in a Hispanic accent, motioning to the children on their tricycles. "Hold on, I'll show you."

Classical Mexican guitar echoed from the kitchen where a tamale-making party was happening in preparation for that weekend's Dia De Los Muertos celebration.

Ignacio Cruz, the slalom leader, showed me the way into a separate building, where the Bikes Across Borders shop occupied a corner of another warehouse on the property.

The makeshift shop where the group built bicycles to donate to Mexico every winter showed years of use. The leaning shelves were full of miscellaneous bicycle parts, rims, tires. Bicycle frames dangled from the ceiling. Bikes in various levels of disrepair were strewn about the shop floor. Hand-drawn diagrams of headsets, brake assemblies and derailleurs covered the walls, while murals and posters called for the end to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

I explained to Ignacio that I would like to join their trek to Mexico and he quickly set out to get a tape measure and find me a suitable bike to fix up for the ride. As an avid cyclist who had sold his car two years earlier, I was excited at the idea of building a bicycle and riding it down to Mexico.

Left alone to begin working on what would soon become my loyal steed for the nearly 400-mile journey to the U.S.-Mexico border, I found a CD player covered in greasy fingerprints and put on a scratched copy of a Townes Van Zandt album lying next to it.

My bicycle consisted of a frame, a seat, front forks and some pedals. Some of the parts on it would need to be pulled off, cleaned and greased, but it looked like a good fit. It was in better shape than some, but worse than others.

After spending several hours trying to find two rims that weren't completely bent out of shape, I tore off a small piece of masking tape and wrote "Mike is working on this one" on it before sticking it to the slightly scratched, purple Raleigh frame.

The first step of a journey to Mexico, on a bicycle built out of garbage, had been taken.

Bikes Across Borders

Bikes Across Borders, a project based in Austin, Texas, started in 2000 as a community bike shop. People could come in and fix their bicycles for free, work community service hours, learn how to work on bikes or even teach others. Located in East Austin, a predominantly low-income section of the city, the shop provided cheap, alternative transportation to the people living there.

Soon after its founding as a community bicycle shop, however, a grassroots workers rights organization in Mexico contacted members of the group, relating the plight of Mexican laborers in maquiladoras. According to the Comite Fronterizo de Obreras, or the Border Committee of Workers, assembly plant workers along the U.S.-Mexico border spend more than 15 percent of their earnings on transportation. They saw bicycles as a solution to their problem.

The workers work in what are known as "maquiladoras." Maquiladoras are foreign-owned and run factories that operate in Mexico to take advantage of cheaper labor and, some assert, a lax enforcement of environmental regulations. According to the terms of NAFTA, the companies operating maquiladoras pay no taxes on the import of materials and pay only a value-added tax on the final export product. While the maquiladora program was initially put in place by the Mexican government in 1965, NAFTA has increased the program's scope dramatically. The trade agreement was enacted in 1994 with the purpose of removing barriers to trade between the U.S., Mexico and Canada. It has been a controversial policy since its inception, as the removal of trade barriers caused job loss and, for many, a favoring of corporate endeavors over small and independent businesses. Groups on both sides of the border protest the effects of NAFTA

and while re-addressing NAFTA was a key campaign promise of Obama's campaign, it seems to have been swept under the rug once again.

Bikes Across Borders and the CFO began working together and by the spring of 2001, 20 members rode on what would become a yearly caravan to Mexico to bring bicycles to these maquiladora workers.

It was during this first trip that the group found its name and discovered part of their purpose. Upon arriving at the border with a trailer full of nearly 100 bikes, they were told by the border guards that they would have to pay nearly $700 to bring the bikes across and into Mexico. Instead of paying the fee, they pulled the trailer aside and rode the bikes across the border, one at a time.

Jared Wiley, one of the group's founding members, said that after an hour or so of riding bikes across the border and talking to the border guard, they learned that the guard also had no mode of transportation. The group gave the border guard a bicycle, who then refused to take any more fees as they crossed the border. Ever since this first trip, the group has been focused on promoting bicycles and working against what they see as the negative effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Up until the spring of 2009, the organization was housed on the grounds of the Rhizome Collective, a converted warehouse that housed a dozen or so people and acted as a hub of community activism. The warehouse provided space for several projects: the Inside Books Project, a program that sends books to Texas prisoners; Food Not Bombs, a national organization that advocates peace by taking donated and dumpstered foods and feeding the homeless and needy; KPWR, a "pirate" radio station and any number of other programs and events that needed a space to operate.

In the years since this first ride, the group has brought more than 500 bicycles to Mexico, Cuba and Central America, often by riding a number to the border and meeting a

truck pulling a trailer full of bicycles, parts and tools. This year, however, the group decided that they didn't want to use motored vehicles at all and wanted to bring only what could be ridden.

"I like the idea of doing it all independent of autos," said Roy Coon, one of the group's members, at the planning meeting a month before the ride.

Josh DeCamp, another member, agreed.

"I like the idea of not having the car and riding back on the empty seats that are going to be on the bus," he said.

The group promotes bicycle use not only for its lesser environmental impact, but for its economic feasibility. The League of American Bicyclists estimates that bicycle commuting costs $120 per year, whereas AAA puts that figure at nearly $6,000 per year for operating a car. For both the Austin residents the group helps during the year and the Mexican workers they donate bicycles to each January, this can make a big difference.

The Gang

Nineteen riders, including myself, were making the trip to Mexico this year. We ranged from our early twenties to mid thirties, with 14 men and four women. While a majority of the group was Austin residents, some came from as far away as Maryland, Missouri or New Mexico. For a number of the group's members, their bicycle was not only their sole mode of transportation it was their livelihood. Four deliver food on bicycles for a downtown burger joint, at least four or five more ride pedicabs, a pedal-powered version of a taxicab.

For the few of us that were students, the timing of the trip was perfect. School was out and we didn't have to be back in town until the end of January. For the rest, it seemed that their lifestyle simply permitted this sort of break. Ben and Christine had quit their jobs and packed up months ago and were on their way to the southern tip of South America from Baltimore, Maryland. They had found an ad about a benefit the group put on just weeks before the ride and decided they wanted to make that leg of their trip with us. The pedicabbers in the group were able to set their own schedule and simply took the time off to go, making sure they had enough money to pay their rent while they were gone. In general, we were not career types, and a part-time job wouldn't stand in the way. At least of third of the group made the ride every year for the past couple of years and they planned on making it for years to come.

Stephen Williams, a 27 year-old from Springfield, Missouri, was new to the ride. "Ugg," as we knew him, had arrived at the shop just days before New Years, walking down the road with a rugged sack, a tarp and a washboard strapped to his back with old bicycle inner tubes. He was fresh off a Greyhound bus from Springfield, Missouri and wearing the same set of clothes I would soon recognize as his uniform – a pair of blue

jeans, long past their days of blue-ness and covered in patches, a thick, hemp necklace and a skull-and-crossbones bandana tied loose around his neck. The black fedora atop his head completed it.

His New Year's resolution for 2009, he said shortly after we met, was to live the entire year without money.

January 3, 2009 – 0 miles – Austin, Texas

Today was a whirlwind of final repairs and preparations, from rebuilding wheels that had rusted themselves immobile to building entire bikes for last minute arrivals.

After a long day of getting everything ready for the ride, about half the group rode to a brownfield, a piece of land that had been reclaimed from its former life as a municipal landfill and later illegal dumping ground. The land had been donated to the Rhizome Collective in 2004 by the city of Austin for them to clean up and use.

We set up camp, erecting the community lean-to out of a large tarp and some tree limbs for poles, and then sat around a fire, talking excitedly about the upcoming weeks. The lights of Austin's skyline were splayed on the horizon, but somehow it felt as if we'd already begun our journey into the unknown.

It wouldn't be until later that I would recognize the symbolism of this first night, when we slept on top of green, vegetative mounds that had once been trash. In its current incarnation, one might never know that just five years earlier, the now green landscape had been covered with "680 tires, 10.1 tons and 36.5 cubic yards of trash, and 31.6 tons of recyclable metal," according to the collective's press release.

Bikes Across Borders is, in many ways, part of a larger, grassroots environmentalist and activist movement. At the center of that movement is a plan to reclaim waste and promote recycling. The Environmental Protection agency awarded the collective a $200,000 grant, and while much of the waste material found on the land was sent off to specific recycling centers for processing, some was kept to be reused for foundations or other projects.

According to a 2008 EPA report, the average amount of waste created per person in the United States has almost doubled since 1960. One method used to tackle this issue

is source reduction, wherein products are designed and manufactured in ways that reduce the amount and toxicity of the materials used. This method attempts to reduce waste at the beginning of the process. Bikes Across Borders works at the other end of the spectrum, trying to intercept waste and reuse it after the item may have lived its original lifespan.

Our first night's stay at the reclaimed brownfield in Austin would stand in stark contrast to the expanse of trash-covered fields we would find when we arrived at our destination nearly 400 miles away in Derechos Humanos, which translates literally to "Human Rights".

January 6, 2009 – 102.6 miles – Kosciusko, Texas

We woke up in Seguin to a steady rain, but soon the clouds parted and it was a beautiful, cloudless day. It was a welcome change after two days of riding through cold drizzle and wind. We had spent the night in the yard of a woman we had met at the coffee shop in the center of town. She'd been working behind the counter when we arrived and by the fourth or fifth person in line, she had started asking us who we were at what we were doing. No sooner did we answer then she offered up her home and her yard to nineteen strangers for the night. What seemed to me at the time to be a fluke would soon prove to be the norm rather than the exception. That morning, we hopped on our bikes and headed south, unsure of where we would spend the night.

Our pace had slowed considerably as we took in the scenery and relished in the warmth of the sun. We had left the more bustling routes out of Austin and entered the open, rolling hills of southeast Texas, where crops and livestock went on into the distance. Being on two wheels on days like today felt like the only thing you'd ever want to do.

When we finally arrived at a gas station in Kosciusko, the sun was starting to set and a chill was entering the air. It seemed time to start searching for somewhere to stay the night.

The gas station doubled as an after-work hangout for the locals, who looked at us curiously as we pulled up. We walked in to buy snacks and see if we could figure out where to set up camp.

Each of the men wore a similar outfit: work shirt, with their name and company on a patch above the shirt pocket, jeans, boots, a belt with a Texas-sized belt buckle and a cowboy hat.

We were of the scruffy, twenty-something variety, sporting shaggy, unkempt hair, beards, tattoos, dreadlocks or generally odd pairings of leg warmers with shorts, or neon hunting caps with aviator glasses. Some of the bikes have even been decorated with miscellaneous roadside discards, like teddy bears or plastic flowers.

One man, a large, lumbering fellow named Harvey, walked up while we were sitting outside discussing what to do next and asked us where we were from. We were obviously an unfamiliar sight in Kosciusko, a town that didn't seem to be made up of much more than this gas station and a church.

We started with a spiel that would soon become all too familiar, telling him that we were on our way to Mexico from Austin to donate our bicycles to workers in Matamoros. He looked at us with a somewhat incredulous smile.

"I've got a truck - I can pile y'all in and take you to San Antone and there's a building there, they'll give me $25 a head for people like you," he said with a laugh, calling us crazy in so many words.

Changing tone, he went on to tell us that he's part of a program that takes veterans who have lost limbs bird hunting in Brownsville.

"This is what y'all do and that's what I do," he said, looking at each of us before walking inside the gas station.

Within a few minutes, Harvey returned and announced that we could take over the community center and stay there for the night.

The community center was the sort of place you would expect to find the local barbecue cook-off or summer-night concert. It had a big hall, with a bar, and some outdoor pavilions next to a large field. Lined along the edge were at least eight gas cookers, big enough to boil a cauldron over, and some wheeled barbecue smokers – the kind that dot the landscape all over Texas.

We headed to the pavilion, started setting up camp and using the sinks to wash some of our clothing with Ugg's washboard. Soon enough, Harvey arrived, after apparently notifying most of the town. Pickup truck after pickup truck drove up to say hello, see the to-do and talk to Harvey as he made calls to get the lights turned on and the gas cookers fired up. His wife soon showed up with packages of home-made venison sausage – the fruit of Harvey's hunting - and we all ate what felt like a royal feast, sitting around the tables getting to know each other and our hosts for the evening. There's nothing like biking nearly 40 miles in the rolling hills to work up an appetite.

It was a reception we hadn't expected in small-town Texas, but it was this sort of response we found most everywhere we went.

While many members of the group are quick to admit that riding the bicycles to Mexico may not be the most efficient way, they point to these interactions along the way as justification.

"I think the ride shows effort, but I'm not sure if that impacts the people in Mexico as much as the people we meet here in the U.S.," Ugg said. "It shows the folks we meet that we're dedicated to what we're doing. You don't ride a bike 400 miles if you don't believe in what you're doing."

Ugg had originally found out about the Bikes Across Borders ride during another ride, the Grassroots Caravan, in August 2008, when he met Ignacio Cruz. The ride consisted of around 40 people who rode from Madison, Wisconsin to St. Paul, Minnesota in protest of the Republican National Convention. The caravan had puppet shows, played music and performed community service in the towns they stopped in along the way.

While we didn't have puppet shows, we had music. The two bike trailers we pulled carried our food, cooking gear, bicycle tools, useful items found along the roadside and a collection of musical instruments. The food trailer had been found at a yard sale for

a steal and the instrument trailer was made out of two bicycle front forks welded together with wheels attached. A milk crate sat between the forks, holding the collection of noisemakers and implements of merry making.

Several of the riders had their own instruments strapped to their back bike rack, from travel-sized guitars to baritone ukuleles, banjos to washboards. A washtub base doubled as a large storage container in the back of the food trailer and, combined with Ugg's washboard, was useful for nightly laundry. At nearly every stop, as people foraged for trail mix or bananas, the instruments too would be pulled from the trailers and the group would break out into song. A flat tire was often just another excuse to play a song alongside the seemingly endless highways.

In the months after the trip, it would be these pit stops that I would recall when I would ask myself what it was we had accomplished. During Bikes Across Borders' first trip, the group had been accompanied by a traveling troupe of performers called the Cyclowns. Part of the group's mission had been to promote cycling and protest NAFTA through the arts and it seemed that our group carried on the tradition. In coffee shops, bars, parking lots and parks along the way, our gang of riders, what would later be dubbed "The Bikes Across Borders Band" would play music and spread their message to passersby.

January 8, 2009 - 187.1 miles – Mathis, Texas

Yesterday's 40-mile ride into Pettus was one of the hardest days yet. Four days in and the hills and headwinds had been wearing us all down, but after Pettus, the land started to flatten out, dipping into the edges of the Rio Grande Valley.

Everywhere we've been the roads have been littered with beer cans, bottles, and plastic bags. We started playing a game today, like the "I spy" game bored children might play on a long drive. We would shout out the new pieces of litter we saw, each of us trying to notice the most absurd item possible. As we started doing this, we started collecting too.

Steve found a red bowtie and quickly put it on, posing for a picture. Roy picked up a faded, fake carnation and tied it to his handlebars. Josh Collier scored a pair of rain pants and some Dickies jeans, while Joe found a white, rubber coated kitchen rack that he mounted to his handlebars so he could browse his Spanish phrase book while riding the flat, straight stretches of road. It seemed like every other mile would produce something useful, as well, like a length of climbing rope, a bungee cord, or miscellaneous nuts and bolts that could be used to fix loose parts.

At nearly every stop, Ugg would pull boxes of goodies from the dumpsters behind gas stations and grocery stores. His latest haul had produced a cardboard box full of Oreos, Nilla Wafers, double fudge coated marshmallow cookies of some artery clogging variety and individually wrapped, bite-size Snickers bars. Five days into the trip and eight days into the New Year and he seemed to have stuck with his Freegan plans, surviving without money and living off the waste of others.

Not only was there stuff up for grabs on the side of the road and in dumpsters, simply asking gets leftover pizzas, hamburgers or whatever else a restaurant might otherwise throw away.

It seemed that much of the country wallowed in a pool of excess, simply discarding items and buying new ones instead of fixing the old or tossing perfectly edible food in the garbage because of a spot of mold or a nearing expiration date. This group prospered in the waste.

While promoting bicycles is a primary goal of Bikes Across Borders, Peter Murray, a member for several years now, says he believes that recycling and salvaging is an important aspect of the group.

“I like bicycles, recycling bicycles and generally salvaging useful things from the waste stream or 'donation-stream' of first world countries,” said Murray. “I care about the environment…and salvage being relevant to this.”

A majority of the materials used to build the bicycles came from donations, but much of these donations are parts that were on their way to the dumpster – returned parts that were scratched and couldn’t be resold or old bicycle tubes that just need a patching. A lesser amount of the parts come directly from the dumpster itself. Late-night rides around town peeking in bicycle shop dumpsters were a regular part of the preparation in the months before the ride.

The EPA estimates that nearly five percent of the waste stream is reusable and a recent study published in the Public Library of Science found that U.S. per capita food waste has increased by 50 percent since 1974. From trash on the side of the road to food in dumpsters to the bikes we were riding, nearly everything we needed we found in the trash.

In fact, Dumpstering was a way of life for many of the group's members. They couldn't find a thing wrong with the eternal "one man's trash" – it was perfectly good and there for the taking.

Ugg had taken dumpster diving to another level. Just days before the trip, he ceremoniously gave his last dime to a panhandler and had been living money-free since. While the breakfasts and dinners had been communal, with a new pair of riders responsible for buying and cooking the night's dinner each day, Ugg had been chipping in with dumpstered vegetables and other food. It was a welcome contribution, as most of us were used to dumpster diving for food in Austin..

"If you're starving in America, you're just stupid," Ugg said to me after explaining that every Little Caesar's has a "hot n' ready" deal where they keep cooked pizzas warm and then throw them out after a certain amount of time. Their dumpsters are often full of cold, boxed-up pizzas that went straight from the oven to the garbage.

"There's nothing wrong with them," he said. "They're just not as 'hot and ready' as advertised."

A main ingredient to the shared bucket of trail mix came from a dumpster find in Austin a few months earlier. It was a particularly monumental score, one that had turned into dumpstering folklore echoing through the streets of Austin. Someone had found so many pine nuts, a treat that runs $15 a pound at the local Whole Foods, that everyone and everyone's friends seemed to have had some. More than one person had brought some to share on the trip.

January 11, 2009 – 321.6 miles – Sebastian, Texas

The wind was thankfully at our backs today as we made it across the 70-mile stretch of nearly nothing that is Kenedy County, a region of South Texas with more square miles than people.

Border Patrol trucks have become a more common sight the past few days. Camouflage army trucks passed us today on Highway 77 and it's started to feel as if we're nearing a war zone. The border fence, that next big wall of the 21st century, makes itself known well within the borders of our own country.

Spanish has become the norm at gas station counters and today we passed the U.S. Border Patrol interior checkpoint.

For several members of the group, this would be their first excursion into Mexico. For those same people, Mexicans make up a large part of their home community. Austinites often call San Antonio "North Mexico" – a joke somewhat supported by history – and if that's true, then we're in Mexico already.

In Austin, the Hispanic and Latino population, according to the 2000 census, hovers at around 30 percent, just below the Texas average of 32 percent San Antonio, on the other hand, comes in at 58 percent and Kingsville at 67 percent. Brownsville is 91 percent Hispanic or Latino.

We were on our way to one of the United States' oldest and newest battlegrounds – the Mexican border.

Old men in pickups and passersby have warned us repeatedly of the horrors of the border towns and more than one has advised us to hire a cabbie for $20 or $30 to stay with us no matter what. While some of our group, including myself, were somewhat

anxious about what would find at the border and beyond, we know we needed to remain open minded if we were to connect with the people we meet in Mexico.

The further south we went the more boarded up buildings and abandoned town centers we saw. I found myself wondering why it was we were going to Mexico, when there seemed to be so much need here in the U.S. What would be so different there, I asked myself. The problems resulting from NAFTA and the maquiladoras can be seen on both sides of the border, as factories in the U.S. are shut down and moved to Mexico. According to a 2004 report by the Environmental Health Coalition, Tijuana is one example of this issue. In 1967, there were around 90,000 jobs in television production in the U.S., but by 2004 only 3,000 remained. Tijuana had become the "TV Capital of the World" as 97 percent of the production workforce moved to maquiladoras. While Tijuana saw an increase in jobs, they also saw an increase in pollution. And now, Tijuana is beginning to suffer the same fate, as those same jobs move overseas to Asia, once again chasing lower wages.

It wouldn't be until we reached Derechos Humanos, where we would meet the people living amidst factory waste and working for pennies on the dollar, that I would find my answer.

January 12, 2009 – 365.4 miles – Brownsville, Texas

The night before crossing the border, we stayed at Galeria 409, an art gallery not more than 100 yards from the banks of the Rio Grande and the International Bridge, the main border crossing from Brownsville into Matamoros. It was a serendipitous sort of connection, where someone knew someone who knew someone else and suddenly the doors of one of Brownsville's historic buildings were opened to us.

Gallery owner Mark Clark told us that, according to legend, one of the building's many previous owners had sold thousands of pairs of boots to Pancho Villa's army during the Mexican Revolution. People had sat atop the roof, he said, watching the battle on the other side of the river.

Nearly a century later, we sat on the second floor balcony, watching people streaming across the bridge in both directions. The unending lights blared from above. Border guards, on foot and in SUVs, were everywhere.

Crackers, a half-eaten cake, party streamers and balloons still decorated the main room of the gallery, left over from a recent party celebrating the retirement of Michael Chertof, the former head of Homeland Security and backer of the border wall. A piñata bearing his resemblance still hung from the exposed rafters. Kites and protest signs, with phrases like "Don't Fence Me In," "No Wall, No Al Muro," "Arriba Unidad, Abajo Divisiones," "Honk If You Hate The Wall," and "No Border Wall", dangled from the walls and ceiling. We were obviously on the front lines of the battle over immigration, free trade and all the other issues that come with a border.

On the other side of the river, Brownsville's sister city of Matamoros awaited. According to the latest available data from 2006 from the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Data Processing in Mexico, more than 1.1 million people in Mexico work

in nearly 3,000 maquiladoras. Nearly 200,000 people in Matamoros work in maquiladoras and it was those people we were looking for.

The situation for the maquiladora workers is somewhat ambivalent. Workers make anywhere from 50 to 70 cents an hour, compared to $7.25 per hour in the U.S., but unlike some other jobs are offered social security and health benefits.

Ruben Garcia is the director of the Annunciation House, a shelter in El Paso, Texas, where he has worked closely with maquiladora workers. He says that while maquiladora employment is repetitive, monotonous and doesn't pay well, it can still be desirable.

"If it's the difference between maquiladora employment and no employment, you want the maquiladora employment," he said. "Working in a maquiladora, you get social security benefits and you get a bonus at the end of the year – it is a more structured employment."

Garcia explained that part of the problem, however, is that maquiladoras will chase cheap labor, meaning that wages have remained low in order to keep manufacturing from going overseas to China.

"NAFTA was supposed to create more and better employment, but in fact employment wages are not keeping up," he said. "There is greater poverty in Mexico than there was and there are a lot people that can no longer feed themselves."

In addition to these factors, many of the maquiladora workers find themselves living in shacks made of scraps of wood and cinder blocks, often living in the pollution created by the factories they work in.

Michael Seifert, a Catholic priest who has worked with maquiladora workers in Matamoros for the past 30 years, said he has seen this sort of pollution first hand. While touring an area around Derechos Humanos years ago, he said, he watched as men

dumped bright orange liquid out of fifty-gallon drums into the ravine that runs alongside the neighborhood.

An August 2009 report by the Americas Program details the an emerging hazardous waste crisis, brought about in part by "insufficient repatriation shipments by maquiladora plants along the U.S.-Mexico border, and increased hazardous waste imports from the United States.". Under the terms of NAFTA and the maquiladora program, the maquiladoras are required to send wastes back to their country of origin, but "in 2007, less than one-fifth of hazardous wastes generated by U.S.-owned maquiladoras was sent back to the United States."

We would witness first-hand the effects of these policies in the days to come.

January 13, 2009 – 365.4 miles –Matamoros, Mexico – Crossing the Border

Crossing the border into Mexico was nothing more than handing over a few coins at the tollbooth and riding across the bridge.

For all the build-up and nervous anticipation, it was rather simple. Many of us, who hadn't been on the ride before, had expected much more of a hassle. We thought we would have to barter, to banter, to talk our way in. Surely the border guards would want to know where we were going and what we were doing.

We'd witnessed Border Patrol trucks driving through what seemed like unbearable expanses of desert through Kenedy County. We'd seen the unfaltering spotlights illuminating the banks of the Rio Grande and felt the tension, like at any moment it could all come crumbling down.

I was the first to cross, paying my 50 cents before riding ahead to get some pictures of the momentous occasion.

It was what we'd all been waiting for - Mexico. We'd discussed what would happen "on the other side" but now that we were there, all those thoughts seemed to disappear. Little green taxicabs, covered in dents, careened past and people on sidewalks yelled at us in Spanish.

We'd discussed our game plan – we would all stick together - but suddenly it was happening and everything seemed a blur.

The sometimes-unexpected thing about borders is that they are a clear-cut division between countries, cultures, languages and everything else you could possibly imagine. Along the way, there might be a fluid transition, but crossing an international border can be like going from black and white movies to Technicolor, AM to FM.

We reached our regrouping point, a park in downtown Matamoros, and rode around in circles like a wagon train, hooting and hollering. The people in the park immediately took notice, as did the security guards.

A matter of minutes later, the local police had arrived and formed a line. They approached, along with several reporters. Word of our arrival spread quickly, it seemed. The police stood outside the congregation of park-dwellers that had surrounded us and Lauren, one of the more fluent Spanish-speakers, gave an interview.

The police offered an escort but we quickly declined. The last thing we wanted was to arrive with a troop of police surrounding us. Several members of the group immediately distanced themselves from the official affairs goings-on and headed up onto the gazebo to play some music, as had become tradition by this point. After the commotion died down, a few of us grabbed our bikes and headed off in search of Derechos Humanos, the village where Josh Collier had worked years earlier as a student interpreter. The rest stayed behind playing music and waiting for us to report back.

For days, we had been riding along the highway shoulder, encouraged occasionally by the horns of passers-by, but more often left to our own thoughts, conversations and sing-a-longs. Suddenly, we were navigating the narrow city streets of Matamoros, with their potholes and concrete waves.

After an hour of trying to decipher the vague tourist map we had picked up in Brownsville, we finally reached the end of the road, quite literally. The pavement gave way to a caliche street filled with potholes, glass shards, jutting rocks and garbage. The city of Matamoros, much as the paved road, came to an abrupt end. The brick buildings of the inner city gave way to smaller, shanty-like structures, which appeared to be in a seemingly eternal process of construction. Mismatched scraps of wood and corrugated roofing made walls and fences. The houses were much like our bikes.

Rounding a corner, a man in denim wearing a baseball cap leapt up to greet us. He introduced himself as Chava, shaking our hands and showing his silver capped teeth as he smiled widely. Josh had started to recognize the area and we quickly learned that Chava was living with the family Josh had worked with years earlier.

Fields of grass and scrub brush went off into the distance, covered in plastic bags and bits of garbage. The stench of raw sewage from the canal running alongside the road stung my nose, which was used to the sterile scents of the United States. Children played soccer in a dirt field, where bits of metal glinted in the sunlight and bits of plastic waved like streamers in the breeze. Donkeys pulled pickup truck beds, jury-rigged to serve as trailers and plumes of smoke rose from the piles of burning garbage on the horizon.

Chava introduced us to his family and after discussing several options for where to stay the night, they offered for us to stay at their house, where it would be safer. Chava had warned us of the gangs by the park we'd been eyeballing, explaining that they wouldn't necessarily bother us if we weren't looking for trouble.

"But if you saw something they didn't want you to see, well…" he said, trailing off. The implication was obvious.

The rest of the group showed up and those that spoke Spanish began getting to know the family. The rest smiled, shook hands and set about readying dinner and finding a place to set their things. We'd finally made it to our destination and were ready to celebrate.

That night, we built a campfire in the front of the house and sat around with the family, playing music and drinking Coronas from the shop on the corner. We would get down to business in the morning.

January 14, 2009 – 373.6 miles - Derechos Humanos, Mexico

After a quick breakfast, the group discussed where and how we would run a bicycle repair shop for the people in the neighborhood. We had brought with us a number of bicycle tools, tire patch kits, tubes and bicycles pumps and were hoping to teach them how to work on bicycles themselves.

We hung a tarp from a soccer goal in the middle of the field to serve as a workshop space and began spreading the word through the neighborhood. Within an hour, the soccer field was a mob scene of children with caliche-caked bicycles. There were broken and bent spokes, missing pedals, frayed cables, chains rusted stiff and inner tubes with half-inch gashes that just couldn't be patched.

It quickly became apparent that the language barrier was going to be a problem, but with a little effort and some miming, we could get by. Soon enough, however, a new problem appeared – our tools were disappearing faster than we could use them.

"Please! We will give you the tools when we're done," a member of the group announced in Spanish, "but for now we need them to fix your bikes."

Suddenly, tire pumps and wrenches began appearing again from the edges of the workshop.

Try as we might, our lack of planning and forethought had started to become apparent. We didn't bring enough parts, enough patches, enough anything. We were having to turn people away with flat tires and rusted brake cables. And most of the adults with jobs, the group's primary target, were away at work.

Trying to salvage the effort, Ugg and I hopped on our bicycles and headed into town to find more parts. We bought some cables, a few wheels and a handful of patch kits and headed back hoping to save the day. Instead, we found the field empty.

At least half of our group was standing around with their belongings strapped to their backs. They had decided to donate their bikes and head off to the beach before catching a bus back to Austin the next day. The other half was going to ride to the beach to meet up with us before continuing south to Ciudad Victoria and, for some, beyond.

It was an abrupt end to months of preparation and weeks of riding. Continuing on was not an option for me, so I quickly gathered my stuff and gave my bike to Manuel Garcia, a member of the family we had stayed with. He had told me that he worked about four miles away and had no way to get there. His last bike, he said, had broken down. I hoped, as did the others that had just given their bikes away, that it might make a small difference.

We took a couple of cabs to the nearest beach, Playa Bagdad, and had dinner on the boardwalk. Aside from the man that lived in his van and the people working the restaurants, we were the only customers.

After a few hours, we began to get worried. Where was the rest of the group? There were no telephones on the beach and no cell phone reception.

We stayed the night on a tarp on the sand, wondering what had happened.

January 15, 2009 – Brownsville, Texas – The Short Road Home

The next morning at the Puente Internacional, we saw a few saddlebag-laden bicycles and several members of our group across the way. We ran over, anxious to find out what had happened.

They told us they had been robbed. Chava, the man with the big smile who had so happily greeted us two days earlier, made an about-face from his pleasant demeanor after a bottle of Tequila had been passed around. Credit cards, a suitcase and some other miscellaneous items had gone missing halfway throughout the night and Chava had disappeared with them. The bike we had given him was gone too.

It was a bittersweet ending. We said our farewells to the rest of the group and crossed back into the U.S. wondering what we had actually accomplished.

After twelve long days of riding through South Texas and into Mexico, we would be back in Austin after a relatively short 12-hour, air-conditioned bus ride. It felt unnatural to be sitting in a cushioned seat and covering entire days of riding in just a few short hours.

We'd slept in tents and makeshift tarp lean-tos on the side of the road and been invited into people's homes, even offered their beds. We'd battled headwinds and mile after mile of rolling hills leading out of Austin and cruised along with ease, the wind at our backs, in the flats of the Rio Grande Valley. We'd been given money by a mother driving her children to school in the morning and we'd been robbed.

Now, nine of us were sitting on the bus back to Austin.

Ugg and Rachel were going to hitchhike back to Austin and the eight others were riding further south into Mexico. Joe and Ollie were on their way to Chiapas to study, Ben and Christine on their way to Argentina, and the rest, not quite ready to climb off the

saddle, keeping on until Vera Cruz, where they planned to find a community bike shop and donate their bicycles before returning.

I felt slightly bad for our passengers-in-kind, because we must have stunk like none other. Aside from wiping ourselves down with wet towels in gas station bathrooms and one quick dip in a lake outside of Mathis, Texas, we hadn't bathed since we left.

It had been over two months in preparation and our journey, at least for most, was done and it was time to return to our jobs, schools, significant others or whatever else we put on hold.

What happened with the bicycles next, as we lay exhausted on the bus back to Austin, was beyond our control. We hoped for the best.

I can tell you one thing for sure - my legs were sore, my face a shade of red you'd think unthinkable in mid-January and I'd never been more ready for a shower and a clean set of clothes in my life.

“Turn those bicycle gears, turn, turn, turn…”

A year has passed since I first wandered into the Bikes Across Borders shop. Much has changed, but much has stayed the same as the yearly cycle kicks off again.

After the Rhizome Collective members were evicted for building code violations, the bicycle shop had to quickly be moved to a shelter in the brownfield, where much of it still sits today. New people have joined, past members have rekindled their flame and others have moved away or won’t be able to make the trip this year.

The chatter on the email list has increased in frequency the past few months and plans have been laid for a benefit to buy tools and parts. A deal has been worked out with the Yellow Bike Project, a much larger and established community bike shop in Austin, to share space while preparing for the next ride. And this year, the group hopes to learn from last year’s mistakes.

Peter Murray said that this time around they are looking for “a bicycle specific community who already has a central appreciation of bikes.”

This year’s destination will be Monterrey, Mexico. While Monterrey is not on the border, Ignacio Cruz has been in touch with a community center there and hopes for a better outcome than last year.

Peter Murray said he had similar hopes.

“I think that the experience in Derechos Humanos was similiar to the one [the year before] in that we didn't really have a satisfying connection with the local community and it was unsure whether the bikes and tools would be appreciated and used to maximum potential,” Murray said recently.

When I think of the trip, I have to wonder what we really accomplished. For our months of preparation and weeks of riding, we had given only nine bicycles to the people

of Matamoros. Eight more made their way deeper into Mexico and were given away there. It wasn't even a drop in a bucket; it was a drop in an ocean. With all of the time and effort we had invested in the project, we could have easily bought a slew of new or used bicycles and shipped them to the border. Our efforts, it seemed, were largely symbolic. Nonetheless, I feel like we accomplished much more in the process of building the bicycles and bringing them to Mexico than in the actual donation of the bicycles themselves.

In purely conventional terms, the trip may have been less than a shining success, but other ends may have been reached. During the ride to Mexico, the idea of solidarity, as opposed to charity, was a common topic of discussion. The idea was that we should stand alongside others, from all walks of life, and share in their struggles, whatever they might be. From Harvey, the man who opened up the community center in Kosciusko, to the woman who handed us money out the window of her car, we connected with people along the way. Sometimes, it just seems that people are looking for the opportunity to give and be a part of something bigger than themselves.

For Ugg, that other end was an awareness that he said has changed how he sees the world.

"The main thing for me that came out of the Bikes Across Borders ride was being in Derechos Humanos," he said. "It really astounded me, the level of poverty there. I'd always thought I'd lived in poverty in the U.S. but it's a whole other ball game in Mexico."

And while it is hard to say if any of the bikes made it to their intended audience, the struggling maquiladora workers, maybe we had taught just a few of those children at the workshop a new skill. By the end of the bike repair workshop in Matamoros, some of the children that had been unable to do anything when we arrived were busy patching tire

tubes and fixing brake cables by the end of the afternoon. And for several of us, we had walked into the Bikes Across Borders shop two months earlier with little or no knowledge of fixing bicycles and were now able to build bicycles from scratch.

"It was extremely empowering," Ugg said of the whole experience. "I learned so much about bike mechanics from working with Bikes Across Borders. I think it's really cool I now know how to build a bike out of scrap parts that's in good enough shape to ride 400 miles."

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